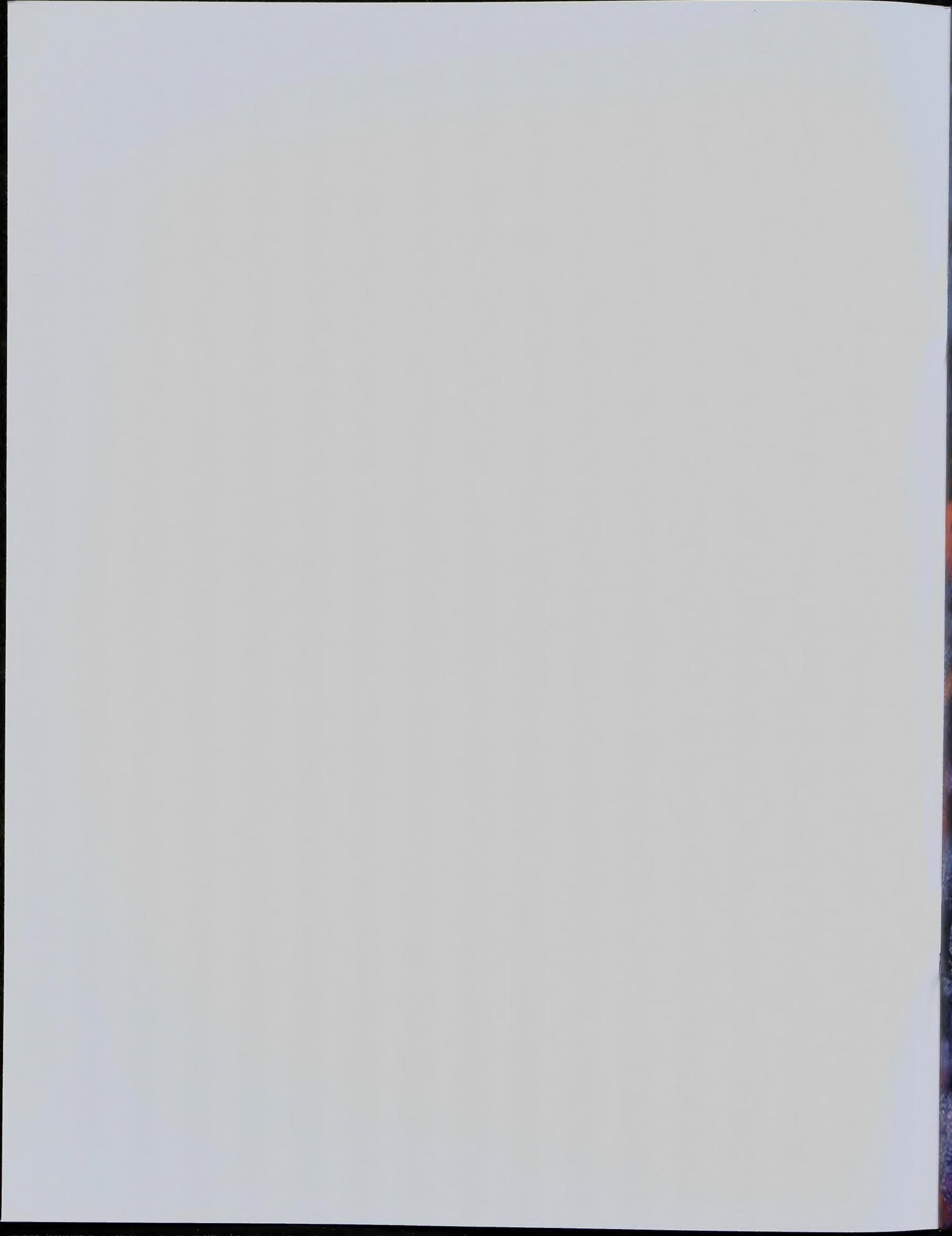


The
Bell Tower
Arts Journal

2021

Arts Journal

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THE BELL TOWER ARTS JOURNAL

Volume 14

2020 – 2021

Editor

Regan Minkel

Editorial Board

The editorial board for the journal is comprised of full-time faculty members from the English Department, the Visual Communications Department, and the Fine Arts Department. The editorial board has the final approval on all selections and publication decisions.

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About the title:

Just as the Bell Tower at Tyler Junior College chimes on the quarter hour to mark the passage of time, it reminds students of the harmony which surrounds them in their educational pursuits. Music, dance, theatre, art, athletics, and academics blend to make Tyler Junior College a beacon to the community, the state, and the world at large. As the echoes of the chords filter through the oaks, their vibrations tremble far beyond the confines of the brick archways and winding walks where students gather. Tyler Junior College is a lofty tower of educational opportunity for students who have come from all parts of the world. *The Bell Tower Arts Journal* proudly hails the accomplishments of its hallowed halls and beckons those who would seek both its traditions and the promise of tomorrow.

~Judith Bateman, 2006

Editorial Policy:

The Bell Tower Arts Journal is sponsored by the Psi Gamma Chapter of Sigma Kappa Delta, the National English Honor Society. We accept submissions of poetry, short fiction, non-fiction essays, photography, and fine and graphic art by current Tyler Junior College students. We accept submissions for consideration only during the fall semester each year for possible publication in the subsequent spring semester. *The Bell Tower Arts Journal* is entirely student generated and seeks to provide a publishing venue for the rich artistic expression of TJC students.

Our goal is to create a publication that is a high quality, content-rich source of literary and artistic expression on a wide range of topics and themes. Therefore, we seek unique, insightful work displaying vivid, lively language and artistic skill.

All submissions **must** be the original work of the student writer or artist who submits it for consideration or publication. **We do not accept previously published or plagiarized work.** Every attempt is made by the editor to assure originality. All literary pieces will be submitted to turnitin.com for an originality report. However, it is ultimately the responsibility of each student to submit only his or her own literary and artistic work.

Moreover, while we strongly support intellectual freedom as the right of every individual from all points of view, we do not accept work deemed pornographic, profane, exploitative, or that seeks to cause injury to an individual or group.

Tyler Junior College gives equal consideration to all applicants for admission, employment and participation in its programs and activities without regard to race, creed, color, national origin, gender, age, marital status, disability or veteran status.

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THE WAKING SILENCE

Oh, the waking silence,
The peace and solitude,
Where time, frozen, begins melting
As ice into water.
The line between morning and night,
For a moment blurs.
The world stands still.
There I am, separate,
Hidden from His gaze,
Blending into the Fabric,
One with His creation.
There I commune with the stars,
And all the Celestials whisper in my ear
Their divine secrets, eons kept in darkness,
Before fading into daylight,
As the morning finds me in my stillness,
And I am once again thrust into the animate chaos.

-Brennen Johnson, Tyler



PRINCE'S PORTRAIT
Kirsten Hahn / Ben Wheeler / Acrylic

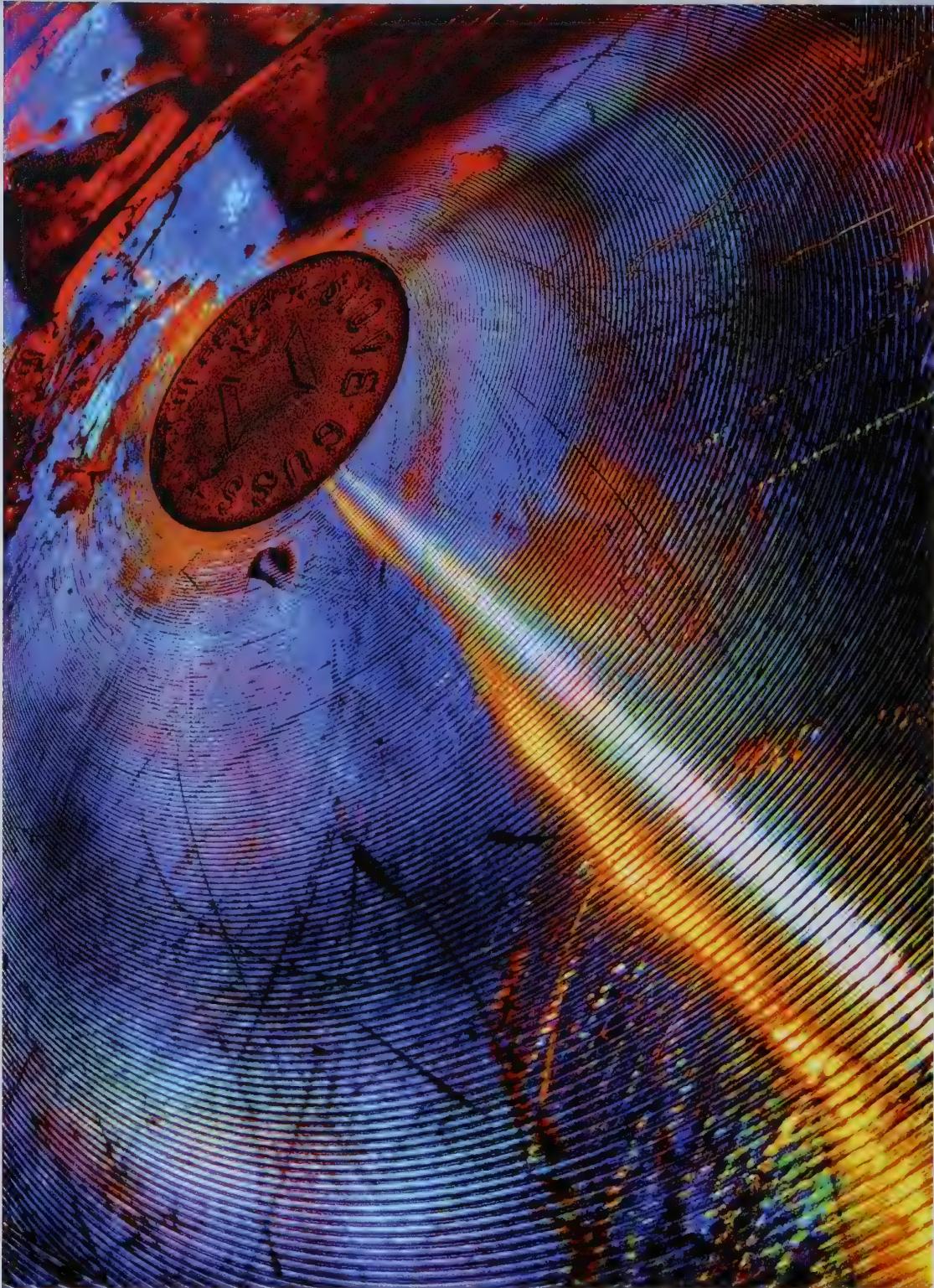


AERIAL SUNRISE
Chris Swann / Winsboro / Photography

SURRENDER

My purpose unmasked,
the veil of my heart torn,
all I could see was Your beauty.
Your presence washing over me;
(I am) untouchable.
This is the overflow of my heart,
which I surrender to You.

-Jessica King, Tyler



ORDINARY INTO EXTRAORDINARY
Julia Del Rosario / Tyler / Photography

MIRROR, MIRROR

"Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?" I whisper, fingers gripping the counter—tight, so tight. The shadow behind me smirks, its sickly eyes meeting mine in the glass; thin, cracked lips part ever so slightly to reveal the glint of pristine white teeth.

"Not you." Its voice crackles in my mind like radio static, and the world sways around me for a second, everything blurring, pressure in my head growing. Righting myself, I shake my head and take a deep breath.

"Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?" I repeat, voice firmer, and the shadow cackles; the rail-thin shoulders shake as it curls over my form. Black claws wrap around my arms and trace the lines, like ladders, up to my shoulder; a shudder rushes through me when it reaches the thick, angry, bulging scars at the top of it all, kings of their kind.

"Pretty little bird, who clipped your wings?" The shadow coos, voice echoing in my ears. "Why wouldn't you want to fly? No one wants a crippled bird; no one wants something so obviously broken." Dizziness rushes back and steals my breath, and I fight just to breathe. My grip tightens, my jaw clenches, and my shoulders tremble.

"Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?" I'm almost screaming now, voice high, unrecognizable behind the desperation and fear. The claws dig in, tracing vertical paths, caressing the ones at the base of my wrist, and memories flood in. I twitch at the thoughts; the shadow pulls me closer, lips curving as its sickly eyes delight in my bared-open despair.

"My favorite is this one." It carves a delicate red line on my darkest shame; a thin, pale mark, barely noticeable, just below where wrist meets hand. "I'll enjoy gazing at it on your wedding day. Maybe I'll even look at it when you're cold in your casket. I wonder what everyone else thinks of it."

Everything breaks, and I tear my gaze from the mirror, away from those sickly, piercing eyes that hold me captive. Tears race down my face as sobs wrack my thin frame, and, letting myself collapse to the floor, I wrap my arms around my shaking body to hold it all together. It doesn't work, though, and it never will because the cracks have already torn me apart.

Even with my eyes closed, that pale gaze stares back at me, pristine teeth flashing and black claws curling. It chuckles, a raspy, rattling sound, like bones and teeth. "You can't escape your shadow, pretty bird, not without flying." Long after it speaks, the shadow's voice faintly echoes in the halls of my mind, and, slowly going numb, I stare at the long shadow cast by my curled form. It smirks back.

-Alicia Mullings, Lindale



OCEAN VIEW
Betty Briggs / Tyler / Acrylic



ROOTS OF LIFE
Elida Barron / Tyler / Glass, Glue, Wood, Fairy Lights

PLAYING WITH FIRE

I stitch my tongue to the roof of my mouth
with hope to silence the words.
Stuck on the tip,
begging to be released.

I burn the nerves from my fingers' tips
hoping to stop them from straying
towards your skin,
where they can never return.

I bury my feet in the sand
to try to keep myself from moving any closer
out of fear of not having the strength
to walk away again.

Yet, my eyes still wander across your face.
My heart still screams through all the mutes.
My mind still lingers on where we've been.

And you still remain,

waiting patiently for me to break.
To fall victim to your knowing eyes,
waiting to go in for the kill.

Because I am a match,
and once you strike,
I will be consumed.

-Brittani Rainer, Cayuga

You

I have heard it said that it takes your body
seven years to replace every cell. If this is true,

that means that in exactly 6 years, 11 months,
12 days, 13 hours and 52 minutes, I will have a
body that will not have touched you.

I will have eyes that have never seen you smile,
arms that will have never held you,
ears that will not have heard you laugh,
lips that will not have kissed you,
and a heart that had not loved you.

In 6 years, 11 months, 12 days, 13 hours and 49 minutes
my body will no longer have anything
to do with you.

But though the body is willing,
the mind still holds on to the
memories of you.

The night that we first met,
we danced so much your hair was slick with sweat.
And yet,
I was enthralled by you.

A year passed by; we met again.
I thought we both wanted to be more than friends,
and at that dance was when my lips first kissed you.

A few months later I said "I love you."
And you said "I love you, too."
And then, a week later, you had found someone new.

You said you just wanted to be friends.
I thought that I would be okay in the end,
but then,
I called you pretty on a live stream.
Your new guy got mad, and here's the thing
you said to me. "He doesn't have to worry about you."

The wall I had built around my heart,
with those words, was torn apart.
And for the first time, I feel the pain brought on by you.
Seven years may rebuild my heart,
change my skin, give my body a new start,
but left still there, will be the memory of You.

6 years, 11 months, 12 days, 13 hours and 34 minutes.

-John Wofford, Rusk



CRYPTIC REEF
Brianna Murphy / Tyler / Photoshop

HANNAH

Watching her fall apart is the hardest thing I have ever had to do. She fights daily to be "normal." Mental illness is the worst because you can't see it and you can't "fix it." My daughter is fourteen years old and has been battling her demons since she was five. It started out as overreactions to discipline or authority. As she grew, so did her anger and outbursts. Being a mom of someone with a mental illness is hard. Knowing you can't truly help them tears your heart out every day. Try dealing with life in general and then add a tornado to that. Some days are great, but some days are the worst. She is a typical fourteen-year-old girl; she worries about what everyone thinks, has an attitude for days, and that is on a good mental health day. There are days she battles herself from the minute she wakes up until she goes to sleep. I try to see these days and make them better, but that doesn't usually happen. I seem to be a trigger for her. That hurts more than you can know. All I have ever wanted for her is to be healthy and happy. I feel as if I have failed at both. Life sucks sometimes. We never know what to expect next with her. Each minute is different unless she gets mad/upset, then that can last for thirty minutes, to hours, depending on how bad it is. Have you ever had your daughter ask to go to a mental hospital because "something just isn't right"? I say all of this to tell you that my girl is out in this world. Please be careful with her. Be nice to people you don't know; some are struggling just to make it through the day.

-Brandi Sweet, Hawkins

A SUNRISE SONNET

Sunrise, bring your bluebird's song.
Cheap eggs made with pepper and salt,
Burned coffee brewed far too strong,
School buses screeching to a halt.
Bring your green, dewdrop grass,
Sleepy mornings, thick like honey,
Perfect mornings, fragile as glass,
Shower songs and dancing funny.
Bring your light "Good morning!" kiss
and, "Where'd I leave my keys?"
Warm sunrise rays of golden bliss,
Bring a gentle morning breeze.
And even if the day is filled with sorrow,
we'll start again when I see you tomorrow.

- Jessica Hopkins, Brownsboro



LADY
Kirsten Hahn / Ben Wheeler / Acrylic

L I Q U I D S U N

I feel the weight of the past ten years on my back. Literally. Everything I have worked towards is packed into a massive, misshapen bag strapped to my shoulders. I look out over the desert I need to cross, and I think about praying. I don't—because I am still halfway sure God is sending me to Hell for the sin that has consumed me. I slide down the hill and start walking. With each step I am painfully aware of what I am carrying—and what it means for the earth if I die. Inside my bag is a massive variety of seeds—as well as a catalogue for keeping them and a cooler stocked with minnows. Everything in my backpack is the last of its species. In the last pocket is a water bottle, but I almost regret packing it, because I have less room for the seeds. Well—I guess it's better for a few to make it then for all to die with me. With this thought a shot rings out and part of a rock near my feet chips off. I don't look back. I run. Now I pray that God will let me save the wildlife in my bag—even though it is a sin. Even though it says in the scriptures that eating food grown yourself is an affront to God because it has not been blessed by the priests.

"God," I sob as I run, "Save me and I will dedicate my backpack to you!" Another bullet whistles over my head and I trip, scraping my knees. I stagger to my feet, sure that the minnows are dead, and I hear a cry from the patrolmen behind me.

"Heretic!" they scream. I know they are right, but I can't help myself. If God didn't want us eating from forbidden trees, why would he make forbidden fruit taste so good? I'm not thinking this now as I run, but usually, I fantasize about that day. As a child I tasted a pomegranate offered to me by an old lady on her front step. Liquid sun—that's what it tasted like—sun and stars. I am not conscious of this thought as I run through the desert, but still my dry mouth begins to salivate.

I trip again, and this time I fall into a wide crevasse that opens into a carved-out valley. I hold my breath and finally land at the bottom. My hand hurts. The cavern goes two ways. The right seems to open up more, but I hear a voice in my head, clear as glass.

"Go left." I go to the left and I can barely fit. I need to take my backpack off to drag it behind me. I slide sideways until I round a bend and it opens up. There in front of me are another two branches, one to the left, and one to the right. I think I will go left again, but I hear the voice.

"Go right." I go to the right and it is even tighter. I wonder if it is worse to be shot dead or to be dragged out of the cavern so roughly that my body is peeled away. But again, the cavern opens up and there is a dead end. I panic and pace like a trapped animal, but, a third time, I hear the voice—this time much fainter.

"Quiet," it whispers. I hold still. I hear the men in the distance. I hear a quiet bubbling. I look down, and very low in the wall, hidden under an overhang, is a narrow hole.

"Oh, God." I know already where I am going, but I hate it. I get on my belly and slide into the hole, pushing my backpack ahead of me. The cave opens up. I hear it again, even louder now. Water. I can't see at all and I didn't pack a light, but I feel around until I touch water so cold it hurts. Beside the stream is a bank of cool sand. I sit and pray that no one comes, my eyes focused on the little light coming from the hole I crawled through at the far end of the cave. It is silent.

I wonder if the people searching for me are too busy to hunt for long or if they have other people to catch in the desert. I open my bag and the cooler. I expect to find dead minnows inside, but when my finger dips in the water, I feel them nibble. It's a miracle. I search around for my bottle and I refresh the water in the cooler. Then, I dip the water bottle in the creek and I taste it. It is bitter; I spit it out. The light on the far end of the cave shifts and I freeze. There are people walking back and forth. I hear muffled talking. They don't notice the little hole below, but I'm afraid the tiny taps of the minnows against the cooler will give me away. I hug them close to my chest and tears fill my eyes at the thought of them dying. "Should I dump them in the creek? No, the cold would kill them." I imagine in my mind that maybe, if I die, one of the patrolmen will secretly be good. Maybe he will take the seeds and the fish and carry them to safety. The thought is comforting, in an unsettling way.

The shadows move away, and it is quiet. I wait. The tapping of the fish helps abate my fear of the dark. When they stop, I feel guilty to shake the cooler so they start up again. They are my children—the little fish. They are the things I love most in the world. The light at the end of the cave grows less and less, and, finally, there is no light at all. I put the cooler back in the bag and I feel my way over to the hole. I slide out tenderly and worm my way back out of the right tunnel. I hear the call of a night bird and freeze. I listen, but the bird is quiet. Nervously, I inch forward until I reach the branching in the tunnel.

"Go back the way you came," the voice said. I am ninety percent sure that the voice does not mean I should go back to the cave, so I head down the tunnel to the original spot I fell in, I think. It's too dark.

"Keep going," says the voice. I stumble and twist my ankle, but I am too afraid of the noise I make falling to feel the entirety of the pain. I stand up and limp forward. The cavern opens because I can hear the breeze echoing about the walls. The ground suddenly slopes upward, and I am crawling on my hands and bloodied knees. I feel a small piece of gravel stab my open wound, and when I reach to pull it out, my hand catches in a thorn bush.

"Great," I growl angrily as I rip the thorns out with my teeth. I finally get up over the incline by worming on my belly, and I keep walking.

There are stars out, but no moon. I see the North Star and I put my back to it. It is so cold. My chest aches. I pick the gravel out of my knee and feel a small bit of satisfaction.

The whole night I wander against the path of the stars. The sun crests the dunes to the east and I am relieved that I have been going the right direction. I see a mountain in the distance. I am headed there. But, as the sun climbs into the afternoon, I am convinced I will be dead before I reach it. My head is swollen. If I had a mirror, I bet it would be the size of a watermelon. I think about the pictures of watermelons I have seen. My pace slows and it is unbearable seeing the mountain in the distance. No matter how many steps I take I do not get closer. I'm still afraid I will be caught. There is no cover anywhere, but I know I will die before they reach me. My walking slows to a crawl, and, for a moment, I think of drinking the minnows' water and leaving the bag behind. I fall on my face, and the bag crushes me into the sand. I'm so ashamed. I weep because of all the trying, of all the mistakes, and of my dream of tasting pomegranate again. In the end, I will die out here in the sand. I'll go to Hell for tasting the sun and nothing will be left of me. The minnows will be little mummies in the desert.

A light brighter than the midday sun erupts above my head. I stretch my neck upwards and I see a hand. In it is the biggest pomegranate I have ever seen. It is as big as me, sliced in half, and dripping.

"Drink, oh blessed one." It is the same voice as in the caverns. I am sure I am crazy, but a drop strikes my open mouth and I taste it. Liquid sun. Immediately, I feel as if I had just awoken and I leap to my feet.

"You have loved me, loved my creation. I am proud that I have come to know you. You will cross this desert. You will never thirst again, and child..." My voice is tiny as I answer.

"Y-yes?"

"When we meet, I will greet you with fresh pomegranates." The light flashes and the hand is gone. My mouth is still open. I can still taste the sweetness, and the red juice stains my chin. I begin to run. The mountain is much closer now.

-Chloe Higgins, Mineola



PAULINE
Carly Garcia / Longview / Acrylic



AP
2019

LIFE SAVER

Julia Del Rosario / Tyler / Graphic Art

DEAR YOUNGER ME

I write this to the younger me,
the me I hated most of all,
and with these words, I hope you'll see
that even angels fall.
With these vows, I solemnly swear
in sickness or in health,
when life refuses to play fair,
when pennies make up your wealth,
to be a kinder, better me,
and treat you with respect,
to not be your worst enemy
when you fail to be perfect.
Dear me, I write to tell you now
that this is not your final bow.

-Jessica Hopkins, Brownsboro

A PASSING THOUGHT

Summer lily 'twas I,
Vibrant, full of seed,

With skin of an apple
tugged freshly from the tree.

A passing mote of pollen
caught beneath my wings,
future hope yet unfulfilled
of the promise that it brings.

From my pistil, joy sprung forth.
Mirror image mirrored,
looking back at me

gazing skyward
phenomenally, indeed.

Stars that shone above
did not fade away.
The earth nonplussed
continues in its cycle.

Yet, in a fortnight,
with hints of autumn in the air,
the stem of my lily creases,
petals weaken,
beauty forms anew.

Fall is past.
Spring is near.
My little lily,
how she has grown.

She, too, shall see
a lily spring up,
perhaps identical,
in comparison to her own.

One can dream a dream
of future heart's desire
So fragile, yet fulfilling.

What a passing thought.

-Darlann Rubio, Tyler



CATERPILLAR FEVER DREAM

Elizabeth Mitchell / Hallsville / Acrylic



PEACEFUL TRANQUILITY
Anna Strohschein / Gilmer / Acrylic & Ink

I'M FINE

Love, hate, despair withdraw,
here is a girl who goes through
it all.

Laughing, crying, smiling,
here is a girl who is
compromising.

Shame, blame, entertain,
here is a girl who cannot
cut the chain.

Appearance, impression, reflection,
here is a girl who struggles with
connection.

Composure, maintain, do not complain,
here is a woman who
handles the pain.

-Jennifer Hunt, Tyler



SUITCASE
Julia Del Rosario / Tyler / Graphic Art

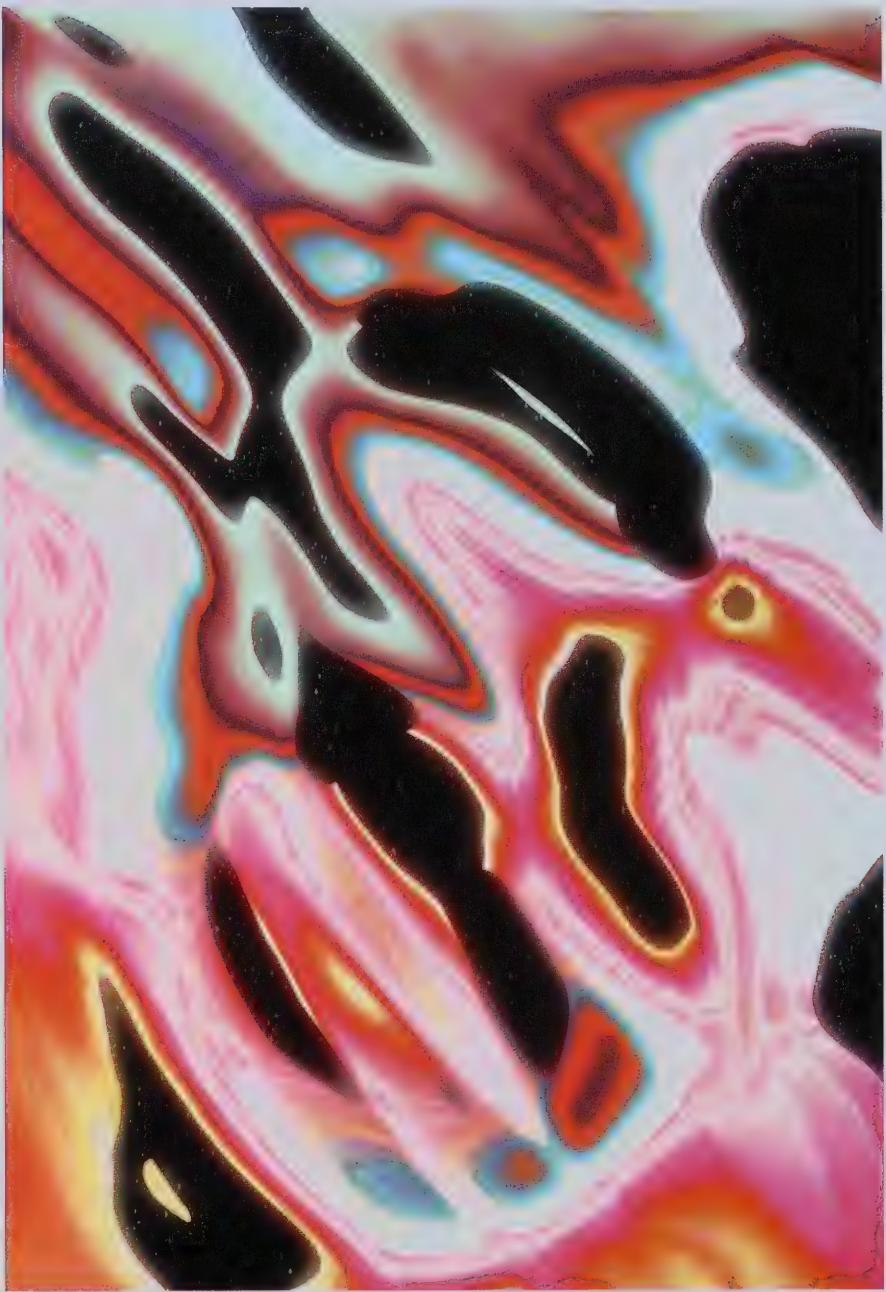
LET IT FLOW

Let it flow freely,
like a white river from your mouth,
words of cunning and clever mind,
loose of tongue.

Wit sharp as diamond blade,
unsheathed with blur and red blood.

Unleash from the soulful depths
a fire and fury
shaking earth and body
for all creation's ear,
those words which cannot rest within,
or, with great sound and crash of thunder,
will they come violently forth
from that earthen frame,
by God crafted, not to restrain,
but to release that which cries out,
“I am alive!”

-Brennen Johnson, Tyler



WAVY
Chris Swann / Winsboro / Graphic Art



CAGED
Hillary White / Longview / Photography

SERENITY

Sharp blades of the richest, earth green grass surround her.
The feeling of the day's warmest sun hovers high in the sky and encompasses her.
She can hear the rowdy, uproarious applause the trees sing
as the brisk wind glides through them, and brings the sounds of the season's spring.

Sweet smells of sun on the concrete, dirt under her nails, and the flowers,
wafting gently on the breeze is all she needs to let peace overpower.
The shade of the oldest tree, with the strongest roots, and the biggest canopy
set the scene for her to relax and enjoy its majesty.

No blanket to soften her rest, only the damp, unsettled dirt grounds her.
The smell of the last night's rain grants the freshest air just for her.
Except for the distant squirrels and songbirds, she is alone.
She ponders what she knows and all that may await her in the unknown.

So many shades of plush, vibrant green surround.
The wildflowers of every shape and shade offset the striking bark of brown.
The burning power of the sun now at its highest peak, but she is safe.
She does not find respite really anywhere else, only in such a place.

Time slows, yet rushes to catch up with her as she daydreams,
trying to find an escape from the mainstream.
She rests for a while, focuses, and closes her eyes,
feeling her worries can take a break before they and she must arise.

- Mallory Hallmark, Tyler



FLEETING BEAUTY
Kristina Crawford / Forney / Photography

A LETTER TO MY LONG-LOST LOVE

Dear long-lost love,

How is it that I find myself in this exact same state, teary eyed at the forefront of a letter? This intensity I have balled up on the top of my bosom that keeps the fresh crisp air far from my lungs. The flutter in my stomach that lingers even long after you have gone. These symptoms explained by one simple word in the English dictionary: love. I am in love with you. Even with such a bold statement, I still must question you, good sir. What is it that you feel for me? When you say such precious spoken words, do you mean them? Is it just noise to fill the awkward silences? Are they just half empty words with no substance? I know the pain of such an answer will tear me apart from the inside out, yet I must know.

-Genesis Indira, Tyler

PERSEVERANCE

Slowly I fall, but I quickly arise.
The world and colors bleed.
Silently my voice cries out.
Saltwater stings wounds that won't heal.

Wandering lost in the forest of the indifferent,
harmful traps seek and prey on us all.
Birds can't sing anymore; flowers can't bloom,
and the apathetic see no issue.

The adaptive, though maimed, make it through.
They change with the wind, yet stay rooted.
They navigate the branches of change.
They carry the forest on their shoulders
towards a world with no traps, and no indifference.

Slowly I fall, but I quickly arise.
The adaptive, though maimed, make it through.

- Mallory Hallmark, Tyler



GRAND CENTRAL STATION
Chris Swann / Winnsboro / Photography

THE COLOR GAY

I am the color gay.
During the day I am a doormat of blame,
pride written in bold.
I am beaten by the soles of blind sinners,
Scarred by hopeless lovers.

I am the color gay.
At night I am a lilac sky,
high on my sins,
captured by a joy unforgiven.
The days bring many lows,
but I soar with the stars,
casting my scars to the grave.

I am the color gay,
exploding with colors,
harshly judged by others.
I have pride in my gay.

-Katelynn Carter, Tyler



UNTITLED
Carly Garcia / Longview / Acrylic

CONTRADICTION

I can say horrible things are beautiful.
I can see them that way—

Just as anyone can see anything beautiful in an ugly way.
The difference is perspective.
The difference is reference.
Most importantly, the difference is acceptance.

There is a concept of a “bigger picture.”
Why other people don’t avidly seek it, I’ll never know.
It has been said before of a good/evil balance,
but we still wish for good to outweigh,
and that is not balance.

We are not made to comprehend everything.
We only experience what we have the ability to.
So why do we choose to be angry instead of accepting?

Accepting takes faith.
People are capable of that.
Understanding takes swallowing pride,
and that’s a pill most will avoid.

-Mallory Hallmark, Tyler



LION KING
Hillary White / Longview / Photography

FALLING TO HEAVEN

I start crawling out from underneath the rubble of what used to be my office floor, the water falling from the sprinkler pipes gently patting my face as I struggle to stand on my own two feet. As I get up, the thick smoke from the jet fuel and the burning walls of the building smother my face; it feels like a hand over my mouth as I gasp for air.

I look around as I cautiously make my way to the light where a door used to be; the more I look around, the more weight I feel on my feet. Just minutes ago, the office was quiet and people were clocking in for a long day of work. Now, it's a living Hell. Burning embers from the floor above me graze my skin; the metal groans and tries to keep itself together as smaller pipes and cables collapse and give way.

I make my way to the light; I see that it used to be the window of my floor. I halt in my tracks, seeing the thick black smoke swirl away from the two towers, the flames flailing out of the upper floors the more the wind feeds the fuel. I look down from the peril above me to see flashing lights and the people circling the base like vultures in the sky. Suddenly, I hear a crash behind me. I whip around to see a plume of dust engulf the office floor, making no way for me to go down the fire escape.

I then sit on the ledge, sobbing, ignoring the Hell going on, knowing that's where I currently am. I start praying to God to help me make a decision I thought I would never have to make in my life: to either jump or to stay with the building. The metal starts to scream behind me as it begins to shear itself apart, and the smoke becomes thicker and grayer as it engulfs around me.

I then stand up, tears walking down my face, falling from my chin, and hitting my shirt. I turn around and look at the destruction, so dark, full of ash and death. I cross my arms, place my fingertips at each of my shoulders, and tense my forearms up over each other. I then tip backward, free-falling, lying on my back as I cry. I watch the images of my life flash before my eyes—my wife and daughter, my family, and the future I wish I had appear faster than a movie scene.

I close my eyes as I feel hands grab my arms, ripping them from where I had placed them. I smile, knowing that I am safe. I am no longer in Hell. I am in the hands of God now as I open my eyes and see His perfect face as He pulls me into His gracious arms. His white robe covers me. Protecting me. I am no longer surrounded by smoke and dust, but am now surrounded by love and cool air.

-Jackson Benbrook, Hawkins



CHECK MEOWT
Katherine Price / Linden / Digital Photography

WINGS

"I'm sorry." The voice whispered the words echoing around inside Willow's head. She flung her eyes open, taking in a swift breath of air. She sat up, trying to recall the earlier events to give her some sort of clue as to where she was, but there was nothing. She looked around. Under her sat soft clouds that glowed in a light pink haze. Where am I? She thought. Wherever she was supposed to be, she knew that this was not the place.

"Hello?" She called out, but there was no one there. She sat in the silence, trying to think, but she still couldn't remember. Then, a rustling came from behind her. She turned, but there was nothing there. She pulled her legs up to her chest and wrapped her wings around herself. She paused. She had wings. Panic gripped the back of her throat as she tried to stand, but instead, she stumbled backwards, falling to the ground.

"Please child, do not fear. You are safe." A warm light bright like the sun flooded the endless sea of clouds. A woman with long golden hair appeared as if she were walking out of the light. "Who are you and what the heck is going on?" Willow shouted, flinching as the woman extended her hand.

"Do not fear, child. My name is Angelica, and I am here to get you started on the next step." Her voice was as smooth as honey and her skin had a golden glow to its light brown tint.

"What do you mean?" Willow said. Then, it all came back. "I died," she said, looking up at the woman. The woman gave her a sympathetic smile.

"What's the next step?" Willow asked.

"Because you died so young, you are now given a task as a guardian angel to the one you were destined to be with."

"What, you mean like a soulmate?" Willow asked. "You mean that is actually a thing?" Angelica nodded, then looked at Willow's wings. "You are different from most guardians. Their wings are white and pure; yours are stained black. You have had a lot of darkness in your life, yet you still defended those who could not defend themselves."

With a wave of her hand, Angelica conjured a mirage of Willow standing between a boy and a masked man holding a gun.

"I did what I had to," she said. "I was on a walk and I saw a man pointing a gun at that boy, so I tried to help. The next thing I know, I'm here."

"And now you are to look after this boy. He blames himself," Angelica said, now showing an image of the boy crying in his room.

"He's my soulmate?" Willow asked.

"Yes." Angelica smiled at her. "Look after him. He needs you. Oh, and one more thing. He won't be able to see you," she said.

A heavenly light surrounded Willow. Once again, panic gripped her. I don't know how to comfort people! But as the light enveloped her, all her worries lessened. She closed her eyes and let the light take her to where she needed to be.

When she opened her eyes again, she was standing over the boy. He had curly black hair and tan skin stained with tear streaks. She let out a sigh, then looked at her wings. "Here goes nothing," she whispered to herself. She sat behind the boy and wrapped her arms and wings around him. He stopped crying.

He turned and looked at her. They made eye contact. But he can't see me, Willow thought. He just stared at her, then tears formed again. "But you died," he said. Willow's heart stopped.

"You can see me?" The kid just stared. "Can you see me?" She asked again, this time with a little more force. He flinched.

"Yes," he said, voice cracking. "I'm so sorry," he said, his voice straining. "It was all my fault. Are you dead?" He asked. Willow tensed.

"Yes," Willow said reluctantly and she saw his heart shatter. "Hey, it wasn't your fault. You needed help and I did what any decent human being would do."

"Why are you here? Are you going to haunt me!?" The panic in his voice made Willow's wings flinch.

"What? No! It's strange you can even see me," she said.

She saw the fear dissipate and she took in a deep breath. "It's just the opposite really; apparently, when your soulmate dies, then they become your guardian angel, so I'm here to protect you."

"Wait you're my soulmate? But you're . . ." his voice cracked out. Willow looked at him and hugged him again, and, for the first time, she let down her walls.

"I'm Willow, by the way," she said, not letting go.

"Alex," he answered.

From then on, she would watch over him, protecting him from bullies and any other dangers. Even though she wasn't physically there, they grew close, but she knew that they could never have what others had.

"Hey, what's wrong? You've looked pretty down lately. I thought angels were supposed to be happy," Alex asked.

"I was just thinking, you've never once been on a date with a girl. You've never even looked at one!" Willow said, fiddling with his hair.

"You want to know why, because I have you, why would I want anyone else?"

"But, I can't give you a family. I want you to be happy," she said, giving him a sad smile. He shook his head. "I'm happy with what I have," he said.

Although she tried for years, he never once loved another girl. She watched him grow through life, she laughed with him, cried with him, and made sure he lived the long life that she never got.

"Willow, are you still there?"

"I always am," she answered. She looked at Alex, his worn, wrinkled skin and his kind, yet tired, eyes—all signs of a good life.

"It's almost time now," she whispered. "Don't worry. You're not alone. You never have been." He smiled and chuckled, closing his eyes. A tear slid down Willow's cheek and she took his hand.

They began to walk, hand in hand, into the light. She turned back and saw the young boy she first met smiling back at her with pure white wings.

She ran over, hugging him tight and he wrapped his wings around her as she had done to him many times through the hard times in life. He looked down at her with one hand on her hip and one on her cheek. "I love you," he said. He bent down and gently pressed his lips against hers. She closed her eyes and kissed him back.

-Dakota Dewees, Tyler



SPIRITUAL SUPERNOVA

Brianna Murphy / Tyler / Photoshop



TOO MANY PICNIC BASKETS
Hillary White / Longview / Photography

FAREWELL TO A STRANGER

How do you say goodbye to someone you barely know?

She speaks of the first time we met as if it were just yesterday,
speaks of all the days that followed with a voice so fond
you could plant flowers in her mouth.

Those days are but a haze in my mind.
I feel like I'm missing something important—
something vital and irreplaceable.
The memories I do have of you are few and far between
and fading by the day.

When your time was coming to a close
we both pretended like it was miles away.
And when it was upon us,
I didn't enter the room.
Because we still had forever, right?

So, I chose to never give my farewell.

Sometimes I wonder if I went back,
would you still be there?
Waiting for me in that skeletal bed,
hoping for another picture to pad the sharp lines of those sterile walls with?

- Kristina Crawford, Forney



*THE FLAWLESS RHYTHM OF
A CHAOTIC MIND*

Laura Greenwell / Frankston / Acrylic Paint



M A S K E D
Trylan Vinson / Tyler / Photography

WHEN HINDSIGHT IS 2020

When hindsight is 2020, what will you say?
What goal had you accomplished each day?
Did you lend neighbors a helping hand?
Did you take an opportunity to make a stand?

Children are frightened because they simply cannot comprehend
the importance and meaning behind the new mask trend.
Childhood memories are now just eyes without a face.
It is up to the world to replace their fears with grace.

A sense of community has left the world,
while the reality of this tragedy begins to unfold.
What can one do to mend another's heart
while also having to remain six feet apart?

Doing one's best is all that can be done.
Stay strong and be brave when others want to run.
Leadership can be found in all shapes and forms
when life gets flipped upside-down and destroys all norms.

When you look back onto this year,
Where children and adults alike were living in fear,
Were you a bright light in the darkness
When the rest of the world resorted to apartness?

While many are rushing to get the year through,
Look into yourself and see how you grew.
See this year's adversity in a positive light.
Learn something from these times and let the new you take flight.

-Marigold Hunter, Troup

